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The Value of Others

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Keywords: Keiko Tamura; Akira Yoshimura; *Shipwrecks*; *Michi's Memories: The Story of a Japanese War Bride*; 'othered' lives.

Shipwrecks opens with a description of waves rushing onto a shore, smashing on rocks, and 'streaming back out again'.¹ The setting is timeless, and the action both incessant and globally recognisable: so *Shipwrecks*' coming-of-age tale and meditation on the idea of value is introduced.

Down on the shore is a young boy – Isaku – who is collecting wood from the sea. Isaku lives in an isolated coastal village, and the wood he is collecting (from a shipwreck) is to be used for a funeral pyre. Isaku drags the wood from the beach to the house of the deceased, thinking it 'a shame' to use the wood 'for burning a corpse when it could be used as firewood at home'.² This reasoning is symptomatic of the logic that drives the village. The deceased, it is explained, did not simply die of old age: when it became obvious that he was lame, his family stopped feeding him. The village is small and food is always scarce; there is a strong sense of community shared by those who live there: it is the existence of the village that is paramount, over and above that of the individual. Unable to function as a productive member of the community, yet still using up resources, you are a liability that – above all personal feelings – cannot be maintained. This rationale also works another way: if a member of the village is fit and productive, he or she can be sold into indentured slavery outside of the village, for a minimum three year period, to help support others. Most families in Isaku's village have a member in indentured service; Isaku's father – getting a very good price for three years – leaves his family when Isaku is nine. How life continues whilst he is away is the concern of the novel.

Yoshimura interweaves realistic, detailed descriptions (at times ethnographic) of the events of village life with Isaku's impressions, using the individual as a prism for the general community, and for the story itself. The benefit of having Isaku at this liminal age is that through his experiences and growing awareness comes an introduction to the practices of the village as well as its beliefs. The tradition of having night-long fires on the beach during winter, for instance, is described and explained when he is judged old enough to participate in tending them.

The fires are lit to entice ships towards the shore. The villagers know that the ships will be wrecked on the coral reef as they approach, yet, always near starvation,

this act is justified in terms of the good of the whole: the cargo of the wreck can feed them for several years. That the crew of the ship will die with the wreck, or, surviving that, be killed by the villagers, is not a cause of major upset or guilt: again, the good of the village prevails. As befitting a general moral tale, this value is tested: what is the 'cargo' they are receiving by encouraging shipwrecks? What happens when lives are 'othered' and their value stolen? Can it be claimed or will it eventually assert its difference? What is the cost of this transaction for the village – and is it too much to pay? These are not new questions, but *Shipwrecks'* consideration of them is clear and surprisingly moving.

Michi's Memories raises rather different questions on value. Originally part of a PhD thesis, the book is constructed from a socio-historical account of Japanese women who married Australian men in the aftermath of World War Two, and the transcription of one woman's recollection of her experience as a 'Japanese war bride'. Reading it after the unselfconscious realism of *Shipwrecks*, the shifting and motivated articulation of subjectivity apparent in Michi's narrative is striking.

But before we go any further, a clarification on 'Michi's' memories: Tamura explains in the prologue that they are 'rendered' – by Tamura – from transcribed interviews with Michi, informal talks and correspondence.³ This rendering is done silently: there are no indications in the Michi sections of Tamura's cutting and pasting. Tamura opens the Prologue with the statement: 'This book tells the story of Michi', here explicitly usurping Michi's role as narrator of her own story, and proceeds with a similar lack of self-consciousness (Tamura admits, for example, that her first impression of Michi is of 'an ordinary old lady who tended to nod off frequently in moving vehicles,'⁴ and confesses surprise when Michi tells Tamura her life story: the dull old lady is 'suddenly transformed' into 'an interesting woman who had experienced so much in various parts of the world'.⁵ Tamura is trying to claim authorship. This is a problem, given that the book is being marketed as 'The Story of a Japanese War Bride' (subtitle) '[i]n her own words' (blurb). More pressingly, it is Michi's own recollections that make up two-thirds of the book – yet it is Tamura who has copyright and whose name appears on the cover. Michi's life story has been edited, but there needs to be more of a gesture towards her contribution: there would be no book without Michi's life story.

Unlike the stability of *Shipwrecks'* narration, Michi's narrative is uneven and unsettled: as the memories of a woman who is still alive, there are personal investments in her remembering. One example of this is her explanation for volunteering to join the Japanese Navy in New Guinea in 1942: initially it is ascribed to a desire to remain with her Japanese fiancé, who has been conscripted there. Yet she returns to this point later and explains that her decision was 'not solely' to follow him – 'it was quite an adventure to go to New Guinea as a civilian worker'.⁶ With this admission, she is careful to play down her independence and find other reasons for her behaviour ('If my father had been decent and had not womanised too much, I might have stayed at home quietly without venturing into those things') – but then refuses to accept such an interpretation by making a statement that claims her past actions as part of her present self: 'But I feel I always had an adventurous spirit. That is why I am here in Australia now'.⁷

Tamura places Michi's account in a broad and detailed socio-historical context. This is generally informative, though it could have appeared as an appendix: Michi's voice is appealing and makes sense of the factual background, not vice-versa (the final chapter, Tamura's 'Personal Reflections', needs strict editing and ought to have been merged with the contextual section). Although Tamura unnecessarily

introduces Michi's voice in each section (i.e. 'This chapter covers the period between...Her narrative will reveal her struggle...' ⁸ etc), and interrupts Michi's narrative to elaborate or clarify points (couldn't these have been included as endnotes?), Michi's voice remains clear and strong. Her memories of the war period are particularly rich and detailed (and it would be interesting to consider this in the context of life narratives and war): in a short phase she mentions meeting a famous novelist, attending farewells for Kamikaze pilots, travelling onboard a boat being chased and torpedoed by a submarine – and on this boat, being in a cabin where the bones of dead soldiers are being stored to be returned to their families: '[t]he grinding sound of the boat while it was changing its course at full speed was something I could not forget'.⁹ During this nightmarish voyage she clutches a wooden box of bones to keep fear from overwhelming her: 'When I realised that we survived the attack, the box which I had been holding was almost shattered in my arms,'¹⁰ she recalls. In an unsettling parallel, soon after she sees 'a woman's body floating in the harbour. Initially, I thought she was clutching onto something, then I realised that her lower half was missing'.¹¹

The narrative images are haunting, and obviously focusing on a singular example as Tamura has done with Michi is an excellent device for getting the reader interested in Tamura's own work – and this seems ultimately what the function of Michi's narrative is for Tamura. As a PhD recipient in anthropology in 2000, isn't Tamura aware of the risks of mastery in narrative and methodology, and that acknowledging some self-consciousness about this is not the same as admitting nerves before interviews?¹² Here is an interesting subject that gestures towards fascinating cross-cultural histories; it seems to me an ideal situation from which to consider the questions of how we can tell histories in ways that retain their vitality, and how we can negotiate with sensitivity the roles of researcher and informant – in a climate in which both of those terms have been questioned for decades. Reading this book I am not sure why Michi hasn't been credited with being a co-author – and it's a shame that despite the liveliness of Michi's memories, what I've been left with is just a feeling of disappointment.

Notes

¹ Akira Yoshimura, *Shipwrecks* Trans. Mark Ealey (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002) 1.

² Yoshimura 2.

³ Keiko Tamura, *Michi's Memories: The Story of a Japanese War Bride* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2001) xii.

⁴ Tamura xi.

⁵ Tamura xii.

⁶ Tamura 19.

⁷ Tamura 19.

⁸ Tamura 29.

⁹ Tamura 20-21.

¹⁰ Tamura 21.

¹¹ Tamura 21.

¹² Tamura 89.